Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies
Revue interdisciplinaire des études canadiennes en France

77 | 2014
Alice Munro's short fiction writing

Domesticated Shadows: Progress, permanence, and change in Alice Munro's "working for a living" and "Boys and Girls"

Les ombres apprivoisées : progrès, permanence et changement dans « Travailler pour gagner sa vie » et « Garçons et filles »

Kelly MacPhail

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/445
DOI: 10.4000/eccs.445
ISSN: 2429-4667

Publisher
Association française des études canadiennes (AFEC)

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 December 2014
Number of pages: 27-42
ISSN: 0153-1700

Electronic reference
Kelly MacPhail, « Domesticated Shadows: Progress, permanence, and change in Alice Munro's "working for a living" and "Boys and Girls" », *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies* [Online], 77 | 2014, Online since 01 December 2015, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/eccs/445 ; DOI : 10.4000/eccs.445

DOMESTICATED SHADOWS: PROGRESS, PERMANENCE, AND CHANGE IN ALICE MUNRO'S "WORKING FOR A LIVING" AND "BOYS AND GIRLS"

Kelly MACPHAIL
Dawson College, Montréal

In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Munro re-evaluates mid-twentieth century ideals of progress by illuminating the effects of a growing urban consciousness bound to forever change Canada. Munro demonstrates how the complexities of progress often result in a troubling centralized control that attempts to domesticate wilderness areas, animals, and human bodies. Although Munro portrays both the positive and negative effects of progress, she ultimately argues that despite its claims to efface the past and erect a better future, the shadows of Canada's wild history will nonetheless abide.

Dans *The Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), Alice Munro réévalue les notions du progrès du milieu du vingtième siècle, en se penchant sur le processus d'urbanisation qui changera le Canada à jamais. Elle dépeint des idéaux du progrès qui concernent la domestication des zones de nature sauvage, des animaux, et du corps humain. Bien qu'elle présente à la fois les effets positifs et négatifs du progrès, Munro suggère que le « sauvage » demeurera présent, malgré les promesses du progrès qui semblent effacer le passé et créer un meilleur avenir.

With a certain finality, the first line of Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls" in *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) announces that "My father was a fox farmer" (100). In writing about fox farming, Munro is able to draw from her own experience and that of her father, Robert E. Laidlaw, to whom her first collection is dedicated. The narrator of "Boys and Girls" is a young girl who is clearly a resonant character, both for readers and for Munro. Though unnamed, she can be identified as a continuing character, Del Jordan, through references to her father, Ben Jordan, and to their fox farm; she is also the protagonist of "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Images," and of the novel that is Munro's second book, *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). Though it remains unclear if Munro intends for the narrators of these texts to be understood as the same character, they do present a similar background, worldview, and experience of domestication.

Domestication refers to the process whereby humans slowly but permanently change a wild species of animal so that it can live with and be used by people. Through artificial selection, humans consciously or unconsciously change the very DNA of the species by determining which individual animals reproduce due to independently occurring factors such as intelligence, reduced aggression, greater meat or milk production, or a woollier coat. Indeed, all domestic animals, whether pets or livestock, develop genetic traits not seen in the wild due to the adaptations wrought in their species by this high degree of human

control. The term "domestication" comes from the Latin *domesticus* and ultimately belongs to a family of words that derive from *domus,* meaning a house. Other cognates include domicile, dominate, dominion, domineer, dominant, and even danger and dungeon. At play in these terms are linkages between the concepts of home and of the master of a home. The idea of domestication thus incorporates both the overpowering of land, animals, or human bodies and the resulting behaviours that make these entities fit for use in the domestic sphere.

Undoubtedly, conceiving of the long arc of Canadian literature as a garrison response to the vastness of a wilderness threatening human survival in a struggle for dominance has become a commonplace after influential characterizations from figures such as Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood. These themes are certainly present in Munro when she takes a long view of Canadian history going back to the last Ice Age that produced the Great Lakes and the rugged landscape where most of her stories are set. The Ontario land where her characters live and work first had to be domesticated in the straightforward but by no means easy process of transforming it into a home. As Munro writes in her essay "Working for a Living," the farms of the Huron Tract were "cleared thoroughly" between 1830 and 1860 to the extent that "creeks had been dredged and the progressive thing to do was to straighten them out, make them run through the flat fields like tame canals" (1981: 11). The choice of terms like "progressive" and "tame" show Munro's understanding of the ideals that were at play in the mindset of these early domesticators. The land had to be owned, worked, cleared of trees, and populated with domestic crops and animals to be considered civilized. Wild animals too were suddenly transformed through habitat loss, hunting and trapping, and even eventual cultivation; certainly this is the case for the silver foxes that are so important to Munro's biography and her writing.

Although domestication typically refers to land, plants, and animals, humans are both the agents and the recipients of domestication, and in early twentieth century Canada, this sense of domestication adopted a nationalistic urgency. In this context, people themselves are liable to be changed and further domesticated as new ideals of civility come to dominate society. The early to mid-twentieth century was a heady time for idealism in Canada—it was certainly not yet too late to fulfil the 1904 promise of Wilfred Laurier that the twentieth century would belong to Canada, and the rhetoric of progress sought to make the most of land, resources, and people. New ideals of domestication privileged modernity, industrialization, technology, and the urban space. These

new ideals that privileged urban over rural and domestic over wild suggest a Canada at once proud of and humbled by its rough background with aspirations for a respectable future brought low by its comparative powerlessness on an international stage clearly dominated between the wars by Great Britain and the United States: the colonial mother and the wealthy neighbour, respectfully. These new ideals rested upon the conviction that Canada had to become more domesticated in order to become more dominant.

These motifs of domestication and domination are central to *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in which Munro re-evaluates such ideals of progress by illuminating the effects of a growing urban consciousness bound to forever change Canada. Returning to Munro's first collection, which won the prestigious Governor General's Award in 1968, is *a propos* given her recent 2013 Nobel Prize and current controversies surrounding politically-charged notions of progress and ecological and biopolitical domination in Canada. Though aspects of domestication arise frequently in Munro's writing, it is most central in the fox farm presented in "Boys and Girls" and in her pointedly-titled 1981 memoir, "Working for a Living."[1] In these texts, Munro demonstrates how ideals of progress that move to domesticate the Canadian wilderness, animals, and human bodies through centralized control reveal an inherent tension between change and permanence.

The life of Munro's father, Robert E. Laidlaw, lays out one path of domestication as a Canadian ideal. In "Working for a Living," Munro remembers her father's love for exploring and trapping in the still relatively wild backcountry as a young man. Due to the high prices of fur in the 1920s, he was able to make a good living for several years. Munro recounts her father's temptation to leave the farm for the wilderness in his younger days but also his hesitation:

> The life in the bush, on the edge of the farms, away from the towns; how could it be managed? Even here, some men managed it. Even in this tamed country there were a few hermits, bush dwellers, men who

[1] According to Munro's biographer Robert Thacker, this essay began as a story but became a memoir after repeated revisions with *New Yorker* editors, who eventually decided not to publish it (535). Instead, it appeared in the first issue of *Grand Street* and, further edited and expanded to include an excerpt of her father's own writing, as one of the chapters of *The View from Castle Rock* (2006), the first part of which follows the story of the Laidlaw branch of Munro's family starting in eighteenth century Scotland.

> inherited farms and didn't keep them up, or were just squatters, who fished and trapped and hunted and led nomadic lives. (1981: 13)

The opposition she implies in the mind of her father is between the tame domesticated farmland and the wilderness, where there was freedom to be found despite the difficult work such a life entailed. In Sheila Munro's biography of her mother[2], she includes excerpts from a 1961 letter from Laidlaw to Alice Munro in which he records walking 20 to 25 miles per day on his traplines for marten, mink, otter, and fox. He recalls, "There was something of a thrill to it. Perhaps it was in doing the unusual or getting back to nature or a primitive animal feeling of being part of the outdoors" (2001: 106). In 1925, however, Laidlaw purchased two silver foxes and began breeding them, later adding mink to his fur farm in 1938 (2001: 107). This enterprise, observes Sheila Munro, was begun at what Laidlaw could not have known was the worst time: demand for furs declined steadily, and the Great Depression enacted a great toil on any industry seen as a luxury (2001: 108-109). As Munro remarked in a *Paris Review* interview years later, her father remained on the farm until his death in 1976. Afterward, it was sold and, ironically enough, repurposed as a beauty parlour called "Total Indulgence" (398). Though the fur industry and the beauty industry do indeed share a concern with surface appearances, the loss of the fur farm and the intensity of work that it represented were very difficult for the family.

For Alice Munro, this willingness to persevere in domesticating a country regardless of the degree of success is a necessary trait found in the hardworking early settlers of the Huron Tract.[3] Following the incorporation of the Canada Company by the British Crown in 1826 and negotiations with the Ojibwe First Nations, large numbers of European settlers moved to the Tract. Though these people were of various nationalities, Munro's Scottish ancestors are the main settlers discussed in "Working for a Living." These Scots, she writes, were constantly active, pursuing work "mostly as ritual, seasonal and inflexible,

---

[2] Sheila Munro (2001), *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up With Alice Munro*, Toronto: Douglas Gibson.

[3] The presentation of the land as a domesticated, controlled, and changed entity is presented several times in *Dance of the Happy Shades.* "Walker Brothers Cowboy" discusses the notion of territory and explains how the Great Lakes were formed by the last Ice Age. In "The Shining Houses," middle class inhabitants of a new subdivision plot to remove an elderly lady and her chickens from their ideal community by misusing real estate tactics. The Gannett family in "Sunday Afternoon" owns a whole island in the Georgian Bay; Alva, their young domestic servant, is amazed that they own the land, water, and even sunlight, though she does not expect it when one of the family tries to take ownership of her by grabbing and kissing her.

work done for its own sake" (16)[4]; however, the result was that they "knew how to work till they dropped, but not how to take any risk or manage any change, they lived by hard routines, and by refusals (1981: 15). Munro's Scottish grandfather meets her description as a "diligent, orderly, silent" man who, by these characteristics, prospered without yet pursuing prosperity (1981: 15). She identifies her own father in this light, for he "had a streak of pride posing as humility, making him scared and touchy, ready to bow out, never ask questions. I know it very well. He made a mystery there, a hostile structure of rules and secrets, far beyond anything that existed" (1981: 10).

Munro's memoir describes the work of her father after he abandoned his traplines altogether in favour of the good prices to be obtained by farming silver foxes. She details how her father built the fox pens and how the pelts were transformed into expensive scarves or capes (1981: 20). Despite early success, Laidlaw's fox farm did not last. At one point, Munro's mother attempted to maximize profits by having the furs finished and selling them herself at Muskoka hotels to American tourists under the slogan "Silver Fox, the Canadian Luxury." The venture paid off well the first year but collapsed when the United States entered World War II and the tourist supply dried up (1981: 25-26). Munro notes with irony that: "Thirty years later these furs would have found their way into second-hand clothing stores, and would be bought and worn as a joke. Of all the mouldering and grotesque fashions of the past this wearing of animal skins would seem the most amusing and barbaric" (1981: 20). As Munro recalls, "I mourned the passing of the fox-farm, as my mother did. I had never thought it might make us rich but I saw now that it had made us unique and independent" (1981: 30).

This change in fashions and the loss of uniqueness and independence was difficult for the family to accept.[5] For Munro, the lost independence was a measure of her father's control. Up until the time that the pelts left the farm, she writes, "everything was in my father's control, barring illness and the chanciness of breeding. Everything was of his making," but "when the pelts were shipped away nothing was in his control any more. There was nothing to

[4] Munro's characterization becomes gendered as she sees men thinking in "managerial, firm, suspicious" terms whereas "Only women were allowed to care about the landscape, not to think always of its subjugation, productivity" (1981: 11).

[5] The effect on the family's pride was considerable. For example, Munro writes that when her father's employer at a local foundry gave her family a basket of fruit, candy, and nuts for Christmas that her mother saw this as charity and gave the food another family she saw as more a suitable recipient (1981: 30).

do but wait; wait and see what the pelts were sold for, far away in Montreal, in great auction sheds he had never seen" (21). For Munro's characters, the unsteady market and the unexpected riskiness of the fox farm leads to financial hardship. In *Lives of Girls and Women,* for example, Munro is especially alert to this situation, but, as she later said, it is not one that is easily understood by readers, even academics, who have grown up in Canada's contemporary "welfare state." Munro identifies such readers as

> not aware of the devastation something like an illness could cause to a family. They've never gone through any kind of real financial trouble. They look at a family that's poor and they think this is some kind of choice. Not wanting to better yourself is fecklessness, it's stupidity or something. I grew up in a house that had no indoor toilet, and this to this generation it so appalling, truly squalid. Actually it wasn't squalid. It was fascinating. (2007: 427-428)

Munro here defends a rural lifestyle that offers families that prized sense of uniqueness and independence she herself cherished. Though she is partially pointing to an almost unbridgeable gap between urban middle-class readers and the rural or small town people of her life and fiction, she is also insisting that the hard work of rural people is often underestimated or simply cannot be understood by people not personally acquainted with it. Although she also states that many years later she came to question the foxes' "captivity, their killing, their conversion into money, which had seemed so natural and necessary," enduring memories remain of her father's "small self-contained kingdom" (1981: 27), which, ultimately, inform her fictional texts.

In one such fictional text, "Boys and Girls," a young girl must face the domesticated feminine life that threatens to separate her from her father and their farm life. Unlike the father of "Images,"[6] for example, who has at least one trap-line, this father is even further removed from the wilderness because he keeps penned foxes. Likewise, he feeds the foxes by slaughtering workhorses that become useless after the post-war introduction of the tractor. The girl fully loses her relationship to the farm when she allows a horse to escape after she witnesses the slaughter of another. She, her father then claims,

[6] "Images" follows a girl and her father checking his muskrat trap-line. This father too is effectively domesticated after abandoning extensive traplines in the wilderness for a single line that keeps him close to his domestic responsibilities. Conversely, Joe Phippen, the man they meet, is a half crazed, bestial woodsman with a whiskey-drinking cat who struggles to maintain the old freedoms against the outside oppression of domestication.

is to be excused as "only a girl," which leads to her subsequent domestication into the feminine sphere and parallels that of the farmed foxes.

This father is an illustration of how distant domestication is from the wilderness mythology. Whether or not we choose to read him as the same father from "Walker Brothers Cowboy," "Images," and *Lives of Girls and Women,* the character is raising farmed foxes instead of trapping them in the wilderness. His experience is not that of the founding Canadian myth of trappers opening up a wild nation but that of a domesticated man tied to a domicile, raising a family, and farming animals that appear wild but that are under his control. Immediately, Munro shows how distant the reality is from the myth. On either side of the kitchen door in the house hang calendars supplied by the Hudson's Bay Company and the Montreal Fur Traders that picture a glorified and impossible Canadian past of heroism and conquest by the English and French (100). This conquest includes the forested wilderness, the system of treacherous rivers, and "magnificent savages" used not as guides but as beasts of burden for portages. The reality to which Munro introduces the reader has little to do with trapping in the wilderness but demonstrates instead the effects of domestication and the Fordist notions that were changing all forms of agriculture in North America, including fox farming.

The foxes raised by Munro's father and in her stories are silver foxes. This is a naturally occurring but rare variant of the red fox whereby the pelt of the animal is mostly black with some white or grey colouration. The silver fox pelt was prized for its rarity and beauty, and fox farms arose that mated only the silver coat variant, thus producing a new subspecies within a few generations. As wild foxes do not discriminate when mating, the silver variation remains rare naturally, meaning that they must be selectively bred in a controlled environment to ensure the continuation of the silver fox line. As Munro describes them in her memoir, "By November they were resplendent, the tips of their tails snowy and the back fur deep and black with its silver overlay. Then they were ready to be killed, skinned, the skins stretched, cleaned, sent off to be tanned, sent to the auctions" (1981: 21). The silver fox's importance to Canadian history is revealed in that Prince Edward Island was known to have one of the largest populations of high quality naturally occurring silver foxes in the world. These were trapped in the wild for export, but in 1895 the modern fur farming industry began in P.E.I. when silver foxes were captured and

selectively bred in captivity, introducing a new form of biopower. Fox farming became a major economic activity for the Island and spread around the world.[7]

The silver fox also plays a crucial role in our understandings of evolution and domestication through the ground-breaking research of Dmitri Belyaev, a Russian geneticist. With his assistant, Lyudmila Trut, Belyaev began a decades long study in 1959 to determine how domestication could be effected through the selective breeding of silver foxes. Belyaev selected for tameness by measuring the flight distance of individuals. He established that selective breeding brought a host of other changes in the temperament, physical behaviour, and even appearance of the animals. Within ten years, the resulting silver foxes could be considered to be domesticated. Through the process of neoteny, whereby juvenile characteristics remain into adulthood, the foxes had been changed drastically in ways not found in nature. They were no longer afraid of humans, and instead sought human contact and affection by barking and playing. This experiment proved, contrary to Darwin, that changes due to selective breeding could happen very rapidly and that changing one aspect of the animal by breeding for tameness would also immediately change other aspects, such as the colour of the coat and general temperament (TRUT, 1999). From the description of the foxes given by the narrator of "Boys and Girls," it is clear that no such selective breeding had taken place on her father's farm. Although they are contained and managed, these silver foxes retain much of their wildness.

Despite the threats of the outside world and the precarious status of the farm in "Boys and Girls," it is the imagined interior that actually frightens the children. Given the Huron Tract context and the opposition between inside and outside, E.D. Blodgett interprets this frightening setting by invoking Heather Murray's concept of a "pseudo-wilderness, a place fraught with ambiguity and characteristically female in its capability for meditation" (3). In bed at night, the narrator and her little brother

> were not afraid of *outside* though this was the time of year when snowdrifts curled around our house like sleeping whales and the wind harassed us all night, coming up from the buried fields, the frozen swamp with its old bugbear chorus of threats and misery. We were afraid of *inside,* the room where we slept. (101)

[7] When P.E.I. produced its coat of arms in 1905, they recognized the importance of the silver fox to the Island's heritage and economy by using two silver foxes as the supporters of the provincial shield.

Childlike, they see shadows and clutter and imagine bats, skeletons, and even escaped convicts. They invoke the magic of arbitrary rules to keep them safe and they sing. The girl in particular enjoys scaring herself and at the same time invents stories with herself as the hero in the face of great dangers from war or wolves in the outside world.

Indeed, the still wild foxes themselves represent a dangerous outside world in the process of being domesticated. In the story, Munro describes the pens much as she did in "Working for a Living." The network of pens is a "world" that the narrator's father creates for the silver foxes that is represented as the domestic sphere of a town:

> It was surrounded by a high guard fence, like a medieval town, with a gate that was padlocked at night. Along the streets of this town were ranged large sturdy pens. Each of them had a real door that a man could go through, a wooden ramp along the wire, for the foxes to run up and down on, and a kennel—something like a clothes chest with airholes—where they slept and stayed in winter and had their young. (102-103)

The narrator is very impressed with her father's "tidy and ingenious" work and notes fittingly that his favourite book was Robinson Crusoe (103). Like most small farmers, he is an ingenious jack-of-all-trades who must invent and fix all manner of equipment in order to make his business thrive. The work, planning, and trial and error that went into the creation of these pens are obvious. Indeed, the most affecting moment of "Working for a Living" is Munro's account of her father breaking down the fox pens after he had to give up after all his hard work. During this period of his life, he was caught in a bad snowstorm after his car broke down; thinking he would perhaps die, his most depressing thoughts were of the disappointment he would cause to those who depended on him and that he "would die in debt, and before he had even finished pulling down the pens; they would be there to show the ruin of his enterprise" (1981: 36-37). What at one time is a proof of ingenuity at a later time becomes a symbol of deep misfortune.

Another aspect of controlling the foxes is seen in their naming. All the foxes in the story are named if they survive the first year's pelting by being kept as breeding stock. This human power of naming animals invokes the Genesis story in which Adam is empowered by God to name the creatures. The father's

chosen names are regal or local in nature. The mother, apparently, does not involve herself with names. The narrator's names are romantic. Nonetheless, she considers her younger brother Laird's names—including Mexico, Harold, and Maud—to be silly and childish. A certain rivalry exists already between the siblings, which is complicated by their emerging gender roles. The narrator mentions physical fights and recalls how she had prodded her brother to climb a ladder to the high top beam of the barn. This puts his life at risk, upsets their parents terribly, and leaves her with a "weight in my stomach, the sadness of unexorcized guilt" whenever she sees Laird's old coat in the rag bag (110).[8] However, Laird's growing power over his sister is already seen in his own name, which references a laird, a Scottish landowner who will inherit the land, farm, house, and responsibility for the family.

The naming of these foxes is problematic. As the narrator points out, "Naming them did not make pets out of them, or anything like it" (103). These farmed foxes remain fierce, keen to bite,[9] and, unlike those in the Belyaev experiment, are not domesticated nor even tamed. The girl feels both attracted by the beauty of the foxes and afraid of their wildness:

> they prowled up and down on the paths [...] always watching me, their eyes burning, clear gold, in their pointed malevolent faces. They were beautiful for their delicate legs and heavy, aristocratic tails and the bright fur sprinkled on dark down their backs—which gave them their name—but especially for their faces, drawn exquisitely sharp in pure hostility, and their golden eyes. (103)

The practice of naming, however, is a constant with domestication, specifically of pet animals, as a means of control and communication. According to historian Keith Thomas, naming pets began only in the eighteenth century, and it was not until the nineteenth that widespread pet keeping practices arose along with a middle class well off enough to afford them (1983). Names integrated the animals into the family unit and communicated with those pets that could

[8] The rags here and in "The Peace of Utrecht" suggest a connection to another Canadian classic of rural farm life, Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), in which the weaving of a rag rug and the memories connected with the clothing used for the rags provide the novel's central symbolic motif.

[9] The father of course bears the brunt of these bites but at the same time is responsible for the foxes' slaughter. As the narrator of "Walker Brothers Cowboys" says, when dogs threaten her salesman father he is very skilful at soothing them, and she admits that "He should know how to quiet animals, he has held desperate foxes with tongs around their necks" (9).

learn to respond to their names.[10] With the farmed foxes, conversely, names are mainly used to facilitate communication about specific individuals in order to control them more efficiently. However, even if the foxes are not to be seen as domesticated through their naming, they are brought into a domestic space after their deaths when they are processed in the pelting operation.

In the story, the pelting of the foxes takes place inside the house in the cellar instead of outside in the barn. The mother detests the necessity that the pelting take place in the house, and she complains of the smell that permeates the house. Sheila Munro remarks that her mother told her that in fact the pelting operation was done outside and never really took place inside the house as presented in "Boys and Girls" (2001: 108). Hence, that addition seems to be included to allow for the children to watch the process and for the smell to enter the house. In Munro's imagination, the pelting permits "the smell of blood and animal fat, with the strong primitive odour of the fox itself" to infiltrate the house (2001: 100). The narrator is unlike her mother in that she likes the smell, which she believes to be "reassuringly seasonal, like the smell of oranges and pine needles" (100).

One of the most compelling sources of narrative tension in the story is the young girl attempting to remain in the outdoor world of her father and the foxes against the opposition of her little brother who is quickly growing and her mother and grandmother who want her to behave as they feel a girl should by helping out more in the domestic sphere. There is no question about the preferences of the girl and of those around her at this point. She enjoys working with her father, brags of her physical strength, and feels pride when her father refers to her as his "new hired man" to a feed salesman (104). Housework is described succinctly as "endless, dreary, and peculiarly depressing" while outdoor work with her father, perhaps because of what she glimpses of his private and never stated thoughts, was "ritualistically important" (105). Reingard Nischik effectively employs the work of Judith Butler in arguing that the girl's experience is an "ongoing socialization into received gender patterns" that act to construct gender as "male and female children are socialized according to different role patterns, forming them into two different species, 'boys and girls'" (NISCHIK, 210). The language of species indicates an expectation not only of a normative socialization but a hardwired differentiation of gender cast as innate, permanent, and unchallengeable. The

[10] Among other domestic characteristics, the Belyaev foxes did learn to respond to their own names.

narrator does in fact recognize a difference, but it is not yet gendered. She sees herself and her father as belonging to the outside world while her mother belongs to the inside domestic world. Indeed, she feels her mother has invaded the outdoor territory when she one day leaves the house and comes to the barn gangway while her husband has just returned from cutting up meat for the foxes with his "stiff bloody apron on, and a pail of cut-up meat in his hand" (104). The mother's words compound her threat as she complains about the narrator's actions: "Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have real help [...] And then I can use her more in the house [...] It's not like I had a girl in the family at all" (105). After this invasion, the girl feels more strongly that her mother "was not to be trusted," that "you could not depend on her," that "she was always plotting" out of simple "perversity," and that, despite her mother's love, "she was also my enemy" (106). As E.D. Blodgett argues, "Just as her parents have done, she must learn that to be a girl is to be dispossessed of choice, of individual identity, and to become what a patriarchal society's language tells one to become" (BLODGETT, 35). The domesticating action is, for the girl, a gender corrective and a forced initiation to the domestic sphere of the mother, the enemy.

The climax of the story revolves around two horses, Mack and Flora, and how they change the daughter's image of her father's work. The horses—old, infirm, or no longer needed—are bought cheaply and slaughtered for meat to feed the foxes. Horses are believed to be one of the earlier animals domesticated during the Neolithic period, and their immense contributions to the development of human civilization range from transportation to agriculture to companionship. After thousands of years, the worth of horses suddenly plummeted due to ideals of farm mechanization when the tractor became an essential tool for modern efficiency; farmers started selling off the superfluous horses, which is how they become used as cheap meat for the foxes. When Mack is killed, the narrator watches in secret from the barn and compels her little brother to do likewise. She says that "It was not something I wanted to see; just the same, if a thing really happened, it was better to see it, and know" (108). She and Laird are affected to varying degrees by the sight of their father shooting Mack and his post-death muscle quivers. Laird appears oblivious and accepting; the narrator pretends to be knowledgeable in front of her brother although she admits that her legs "were a little shaky" (110), as had been Mack's. She does show her rural mindset in claiming that she does not experience

> any great feeling of horror and opposition, such as a city child might have had; I was too used to seeing the death of animals as a necessity by which we lived. Yet I felt a little ashamed, and there was a new wariness, a sense of holding-off, in my attitude toward my father and his work.[11] (111)

Clearly, she had seen farm animals killed before and accepted that as a part of life. It is the death of this gentle domestic animal being used for an alien purpose that upsets her.

Flora is the second horse due to be slaughtered to feed the foxes, but the mare asserts her independence through her uncooperative temperament and attempt at escape. The narrator is aware when Flora is going to be slaughtered, but she does not plan to watch because it was "something to see just one time," and although she does not consciously think about it, the scene with Mack comes back to her unbidden at unexpected times (111). Yet on the day Flora is to be killed, the narrator and Laird come to the barnyard upon hearing a commotion and find the mare in the process of escaping. This is tremendously exciting to the children as Flora is "running, whinnying, going up on her hind legs, prancing and threatening like a horse in a Western movie, an unbroken ranch horse" (111). The crux of the story comes next when Flora escapes into the field and her father and a hired man yell to the girl to run and shut the gate before Flora could get outside and onto the road. Inexplicably, most of all to herself, the girl instead holds the gate open for the galloping horse that surges by her. The men did not see what happened and leave in the truck with Laird to capture the horse. The girl wonders to herself why she disobeyed her father. She acknowledges that her action was futile, for in this domestic farmland, "there was no wild country here for her to run to, only farms" (112).

The narrator returns to the house where she awaits the inevitable. She is tempted to admit what she did to her mother but thinks instead of how her bedtime stories have started to change to adventures in which she is being rescued instead of rescuing others. This denouement, says W.R. Martin, is

[11] Likewise, in "Age of Faith" from *Lives of Girls and Women,* Del displays her misgivings about her father's work through bad dreams. In the first dream, the shed where her father hangs the sections of butchered horses is actually full of dismembered human bodies, and, in the second, her calm and reassuring father macabrely lines up his family members in front of a chopping block in order to cut off their heads (113-114).

> as if nature or life itself has lifted and carried the girl forward for its own purposes, which are both mysterious and benign, because, though she does not understand and in fact resists them, in the end she finds that what comes to her is what she wants after all. This resolves the opposition between the father's and the mother's worlds. (MARTIN, 1987: 46)

When the men come back with Flora's body already butchered in the back of their truck, the resolution and transformation seem almost complete. Laird assumes his new masculine role when he shows off Flora's blood on his arm and jokes about "killing old Flora" and "cut[ting] her up in fifty pieces" (114). He compounds his superiority by announcing that his sister had been the one to let the horse out, which the girl admits when questioned. Laird then points out that she is crying. What follows is one of the most affecting sequences in Munro's early work: "'Never mind,' my father said. He spoke with resignation, even good humour, the words which absolved and dismissed me for good. 'She's only a girl,' he said. I didn't protest, even in my heart. Maybe it was true" (114). Despite the father's lack of understanding and the deep disappointment he causes to his daughter, his kindly good nature remains evident and he accepts her change of role to the domestic sphere. There is a certain inevitability surrounding this domestication that she grapples with when she realizes that she did not protest, even in her heart. However, while the narrator did in fact allow Flora out of the field, she did so without consciously knowing why, although her love for adventure and excitement that she admits earlier appears to be the main reason. This spirit of adventure may indeed make her forced domestication simply temporary, but the resolution means that she now cannot avoid being subsumed into the domestic sphere.

The gender roles forced onto the girl are intended to domesticate her. By changing her behaviour and restricting her access to the farm that she loves, it is hoped that she will be changed permanently into a lady like her mother and thus fit into the domestic space where she belongs. This is a pressure that she had felt for some time: "I no longer felt safe [...] The word *girl* had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened, like the word *child* [...] A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become" (107). A great proponent of this proper domestication is her grandmother, who visits for a few weeks and constantly corrects the girl for not meeting her ideals of how a girl should act. After the grandmother's onslaught, the narrator embarks on a spirited campaign of slamming doors and sitting awkwardly, "thinking that by such measures I kept myself free" (107). Her freedom is, in reality, as fenced in

as that of the farm, her father, Flora, and the silver foxes, and yet in each situation there is a pushing back against the expected permanence of domestication that establishes the lasting tenacity of change and wilderness.

Given this tenacity, Munro challenges the Canadian ideals of progress that guide the domestication of the contested sites of wilderness areas, animals, and human bodies. Although she presents both positive and negative effects of progress, Munro ultimately argues that the shadows of Canada's wild history will nonetheless abide, for although humans play at domestication, time remains on the side of wilderness. The scope of time in *Dance of the Happy Shades* is glacial, and Munro reveals human short sightedness by highlighting the inherent tension between change and permanence. Human attempts to conquer, to domesticate, and to dictate in these sites are called into question, especially when these attempts are coded as nationalized ideals of progress. Munro thus urges a reconsideration of humanity's attempts to grasp at permanence, legacy, and meaning; time and nature defeat them all.

Bibliography

BLODGETT, E.D. (1988), *Alice Munro,* Boston: Twayne.

BUCKLER, Ernest (1952), *The Mountain and the Valley*, New York: Henry Holt.

MARTIN, W.R. (1987), *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel,* Edmonton: U of Alberta P.

MUNRO, Alice (1968), *Dance of the Happy Shades,* Toronto: Penguin [Modern Classics edition 2005].

— (1971), *Lives of Girls and Women,* Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

— (1981), "Working for a Living," *Grand Street*, 1.1, pp. 9-37.

— (2006), *The View from Castle Rock,* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

— (2007), "Alice Munro (1994)," Interview by Jeanne McCulloch and Mona Simpson, *The Paris Review: Interviews*, Ed. Philip Gourevitch, New York: Picador [Vol. 11], pp. 395-431.

MUNRO, Sheila (2001), *Lives of Mothers and Daughters: Growing Up with Alice Munro,* Toronto: Douglas Gibson.

MURRAY, Heather (1987), "Women in the Wilderness," *A Mazing Place: Writing Canadian Women Writing,* Ed. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, Edmonton: Longspoon and NeWest.

NISCHIK, Reingard M. (2007), "(Un-)Doing Gender: Alice Munro, 'Boys and Girls' (1964)," Ed. Reingard M. Nischik, *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations,* Rochester, NY: Camden House, pp. 203-218.

THACKER, Robert (2005), *Alice Munro: Writing her Lives: A Biography,* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

THOMAS, Keith (1983), *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility,* New York: Pantheon.

TRUT, Lyudmila (1999), "Early Canid Domestication: The Farm-Fox Experiment," *American Scientist*, 87.2, pp. 160-169.